



NEWS RELEASE

from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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Megan Durham 202-208-4685

**CONGRESSIONAL MORATORIUM LIFTED ON ENDANGERED SPECIES LISTINGS;
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE SETS PRIORITIES FOR RESUMING PROGRAM**

Now that the President has waived a Congressional moratorium, endangered species can once again be added to the official Endangered Species list, Mollie Beattie, director of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said today.

Beattie said the Fish and Wildlife Service has developed an orderly plan and a priority system for resuming endangered species listing, an activity that had been shut down for a year under a Congressionally imposed moratorium and funding restrictions. Resumption of the listing program was made possible when President Clinton waived the moratorium that was included in the recently passed omnibus appropriation law covering the remainder of FY 1996. A total of 243 species are awaiting final decisions on whether they should be added to the U.S. List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants. However, Congress only appropriated \$4 million for this purpose, half of the amount requested by the Clinton Administration.

"After a year in mothballs, there is a lot of work to do to get the listing process for endangered species up and running again, so the public should not expect to see a surge of new listings in the immediate future," Beattie said. "The Fish and Wildlife Service has established an orderly and sensible process for dealing with the backlog of species awaiting protection. As always, we will ensure these decisions are based on sound science with full public involvement, and we will give highest priority to the species most in need of protection."

Beattie also said the Service will be working with the Justice Department to ensure that lawsuits do not drain all the agency's resources for listing vulnerable species. There are currently more than 60 pending cases that concern listing and 10 outstanding court orders or settlements that address listing activities. The Secretary of the Interior also has received several hundred notices of intent to sue under the Endangered Species Act.

"Our highest priority is to list species that are in immediate need of protection," Beattie said. "We will be working with the Justice Department to seek relief from court orders that require us to divert our resources away from providing protection to the species that most need it."

Office of Public Affairs
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240
Room 3447

(202) 208-5634
FAX (202) 219-2428

To deal with the large backlog of species and the often conflicting demands of court orders and settlements that address endangered species, the Service has established a priority system for listing. Under this guidance, which will be published in the Federal Register during the week of May 13, the Service will give priority to listing actions in the following order:

1. Emergency listings of species in imminent danger of extinction;
2. Processing final decisions on species already proposed for listing, with highest priority given to species facing high magnitude threats; and
3. All other listing actions, including processing reclassifications and delistings, new proposed listings, petition findings, and critical habitat designations.

The Service's backlog includes 243 proposed species that await final listing decisions, 182 candidate species that await proposals for listing, pending court orders to designate critical habitat for 7 species, and unresolved petitions to list or delist 57 species. In order to clear the backlog, approximately 100 Service biologists who had been reassigned during the moratorium must be brought back into the endangered species listing program and they must review the proposed listings to be sure the information is up-to-date. Beattie said the listing funds available for FY 1996 are not adequate to allow the Service to meet all of its immediate responsibilities and that, in view of the time required to bring personnel back into the program and the limited funding available, it is unlikely decisions can be reached on all 243 proposed species by the end of FY 1996.

The moratorium imposed by the Congress in April 1995 prevented final listings of endangered and threatened species and final designations of critical habitat. In addition, the endangered species listing program received only \$233,000 under a series of continuing resolutions that funded the Interior Department from October 1995 to April 1996, compared with \$8 million for listing in FY 1995. These funding restrictions required the Fish and Wildlife Service to assign its listing personnel to other work and prevented proposed listings and response to citizen petitions to list species or remove them from the list.

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